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ABSTRACT

This digest uses an analysis of underachievement literature from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database to develop a comprehensive model for improving counseling interventions with underachievers. It discusses a redefinition of the school counselor's role, describes the model itself, and suggests uses of the model in both individual and group counseling. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Counseling Underachievers: A Comprehensive Model for Intervention

Ask school counselors to identify the most frustrating students to work with and underachievers probably will be near the top of the list. Motivating students to achieve is no easy task, and traditional counseling approaches are often ineffective in producing long-term behavior change.

In a 1967 ERIC document, *Guidance and the Underachiever* (ED 023 112), it was stated, "The research literature from 1963 through 1966 contains more than three times as many studies relating to the characteristics of underachievers as it does studies pertaining to procedures with which to aid them" (p. 10). Fortunately, we seem to have made considerable progress in the past twenty years. In fact, over 80% of the underachievement literature in the ERIC database from 1966 to 1986 deals with program descriptions. An analysis of this literature has been used to develop a comprehensive model for improving counseling interventions with underachievers. Before counselors can make use of this model they must redefine their role within the school.

Redefining the Role of the School Counselor

"The school counselor should be first and foremost an educator, supporting students in their progress through the school and serving as a crucial resource for the academic program. The role we are suggesting would make counselors key monitors of student progress, developers of student potential, and facilitators of counseling arrangements. Specifically, this role would involve counselors in the following tasks:

- Coordinating the school guidance plan.
- Developing strategies for school staff to use in reaching students whose academic performance has slipped, or who most need assistance in developing self-confidence and in thinking about the future.
- Serving as advocates for students who are at risk of not meeting new standards and requirements, and who may need a second chance at a college-bound program.
- Setting up information systems and developing the curriculum for group advising sessions about such things as college planning and course choices.
- Planning and carrying out projects to inform parents about school objectives and how they can support them.
- Training paraprofessionals and/or volunteers to perform special duties.
- Working with teachers and administrators to enhance their capacities in the areas of guidance and counseling to which they can contribute.
- Developing a bank of community resources to which youngsters with special problems can be referred.

"A reconsideration of the role of the counselor within the school requires that principals, counselors, and teachers change long-standing relationships, and that they take new risks. If the counselor's role is to change in the direction recommended here, counselors will have to develop closer alliances with teachers and link their work with students more directly to classroom experience. Teachers and principals will have to acknowledge that counselors can make special contributions to improving student academic performance and can work with them to create a healthy climate for learning in the classroom—and in the school as a whole" (*Keeping the Options Open*, 1986).

This statement, taken from the final report of the Commission on Pre-College Guidance and Counseling, advocates a role for school counselors that would be particularly beneficial to underachievers. Obviously, this new role calls for a considerable shift from an emphasis on direct counseling to an emphasis on coordination and consultation.

Developing a Comprehensive Model for Intervention

Programs designed for underachievers can be classified into three types: primary strategies (direct study skills instruction), support strategies (counseling), and dual or multiple intervention approaches. Research results overwhelmingly support the third approach for both short- and long-term effectiveness. A model is proposed for organizing intervention strategies to deal with achievement problems. Although the model is still in the developmental stage, it can provide useful guidance for designing a comprehensive intervention program to meet the specific needs of individual underachievers.

Description of the Model

In his extensive work in the area of counselor development and renewal, Garry Walz frequently uses the term "empowerment" to describe the ultimate goal he has for persons attending his workshops. This term is particularly appropriate because it comprehensively integrates the various factors that must be present for participants to actually use the workshop outcomes. First, it suggests that the person feels powerful, confident, and capable of achieving his/her goals. Second, it suggests that the person knows what he/she must do and has the ability to do it. And, third, it suggests that the person is equipped with the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to implement his/her plan of action.

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Empowerment. In the model, empowerment serves as both the ultimate and the enabling goal for helping underachievers improve their academic performance. It is similar to the concepts of perceived control and self-efficacy in the achievement motivation literature, but is somewhat broader in that it represents not only a feeling on the part of the student, but also the outcome of an action; i.e., the student becomes "empowered" through the achievement process.

Learning and Grade Point Average. Preceding empowerment are the most commonly identified outcomes of the achievement process—learning and grade point average.

In order for learning to occur and grades to be earned, the student must put forth at least some amount of effort. The model attempts to show that the amount of effort needed for learning to occur can be modified by the student's cognitive abilities and previous experiences. Similarly, there may not be a direct correlation between effort and grades earned because of variability in teacher and school grading practices.

Commitment. When the student makes the decision to put forth effort toward achievement, he or she has made a commitment. It is the product of both the student's perception that he/she *can* achieve and the decision that he/she *wants* to achieve.

Input Variables. The model also includes "input" variables. These are the abilities, attitudes, feelings, experiences, and external resources that the student brings to each achievement situation. As indicated in the model, the student's perceived ability is a function of both cognitive variables and external variables, while his/her desire to achieve is a function of both external variables and affective variables. It should be noted that further development of the model may lead to an alternative configuration that will provide for the possibility that the student's cognitive variables may affect desire to achieve, and his/her affective variables may affect perceived ability.

Cognitive variables. An important feature of this model is that the student's cognitive variables are viewed as consisting of not only his/her mental ability and specific aptitudes, but also such variables as subject-related prerequisite knowledge, past learning experiences, study skills, and learning style. The purpose for defining cognitive variables so broadly is to encourage counselors not to quickly accept the student's "ability" as a fixed entity, but rather to: (1) be sure that the student's actual ability has been fairly and accurately diagnosed considering his/her past experiences, socioeconomic factors, validity of the tests used, etc.; and (2) look for ways that the student's academic ability can be enhanced. For example, gaps in prerequisite knowledge can be addressed through tutoring or switching the student to a more basic course in the subject area. Past learning failures can be replaced by carefully programmed learning successes. Study skills can be improved through direct instruction and behavior modification techniques.

The student can be helped to determine and capitalize on his/her optimum learning style. Even academic ability, per se, can be improved through the development of the student's critical thinking skills. In the past, academic ability was assumed to be directly related to mental ability, which, in turn, was assumed to be a relatively fixed trait. Now, however, there is an increasing acceptance of the idea that "intelligence" consists of various types of mental abilities and that "developed abilities" are a major factor both in test performance and in subsequent mental and academic performance.

External variables. An important difference between this model and achievement motivation theories is the weight given to external variables (family, peer, school, and community influences). In the achievement theories, task difficulty and luck are the external variables that receive most attention. Also, while the achievement motivation theories emphasize values and beliefs, the other affective variables—mood, psychological needs (e.g., adolescent reaction), and life/career goals—are addressed only implicitly.

Risk Taking Propensity. Other areas of research in psychology have addressed risk taking propensity extensively, but little has been done to investigate its specific relevance to academic achievement. The rationale for including it in this model is that learning often involves change, and daring to undertake a new learning experience means having to risk the possibility of failure.

Using the Model

In general, using the model to design an intervention strategy for an individual student involves assessing the student's status with respect to each of the input variables. Then, for each input variable that appears to be a barrier to the student's achievement, a strategy is devised to overcome the barrier. By using an integrated, multiple intervention approach to address all potential barriers, and by implementing strategies that reinforce the achievement process, counselors can significantly increase the likelihood of intervention effectiveness. For example, the use of behavior contracts can reinforce motivation, collaborative peer monitoring can reinforce effort, and celebration can reinforce empowerment.

Although this model can be implemented through individual counseling, a group counseling approach is likely to be much more effective. The group setting is likely to provide students with a sense of peer understanding and support. It also encourages a higher level of accountability and follow-through.

Resource Documents

Bleuer, J.C. (1987). *Counseling underachievers: A counselor's guide to helping students improve their academic performance.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, ERIC/CAPS Clearinghouse. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 286 112)

Guidance and the underachiever (1967). Albany, NY: State University of New York. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 023 112)

Keeping the options open: Recommendations. Final report of the commission on precollege guidance and counseling. (1986). New York: College Entrance Examination Board. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 275 948)

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